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## Teaching and learning online – Developing your skills to develop others.

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#### How to cite:

Stickler, Ursula; Emke, Martina and MoreDOTS Project, Team (2015). Teaching and learning online – Developing your skills to develop others. In: Krings, Hans P. and Kühn, Bärbel eds. Fremdsprachliche Lernprozesse. Erträge des 4. Bremer Symposions zum Fremdsprachenlehren und -lernen an Hochschulen. Fremdsprachen in Lehre und Forschung (FLF), 48. Arbeitskreis der Sprachenzentren e.V., pp. 199–209.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

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Martina Emke, Ursula Stickler & the MoreDOTS project team

## Teaching and learning online – Developing your skills to develop others

### *1. Introduction*

The widespread use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in language learning has not only provided more varied forms of learning for adults but has also posed a number of challenges for language teachers who now need to be multiskilled: They have to be knowledgeable about the ICT tools available for language teaching, able to decide whether a particular tool is consistent with their underlying pedagogic approach, and confident in the use of suitable tools so as to ensure that these tools meet the needs of their learners. It is therefore crucial for language teachers to receive support and encouragement to use ICT tools (more) confidently and to develop their skills further.

The DOTS (Developing Online Teaching Skills, <http://dots.ecml.at>) and MoreDOTS (Using open resources to develop online teaching skills) projects, which have been supported by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML, [www.ecml.at](http://www.ecml.at)) since 2008, address teachers' needs for support by providing a Moodle-based workspace (<http://moodle.dots.ecml.at>) containing bite-sized training modules and the opportunity to share experience and language teaching materials with other language teachers in Europe (Beaven et al. 2010; Stickler et al. 2010).

Our work as a project team<sup>1</sup> is based on a socio-constructivist theory of learning (Vygotsky 1978; Wertsch/Tulviste 1992). We believe that enhancing the quality of one's teaching needs to be based on an understanding that learning takes place when the learners can explore a new environment and actively engage with it, supported by scaffolding in the form of a) carefully designed

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<sup>1</sup> The MoreDOTS project team consists of seven members: Martina Emke, b.i.b. International College, Germany; Pauline Ernest and Joseph Hopkins, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain; Aline Germain-Rutherford, Middlebury College, USA; Regine Hampel and Ursula Stickler, The Open University, UK; and Mateusz-Milan Stanojević, University of Zagreb, Croatia. The eighth member of the DOTS team (2008-2011) was Tita Beaven, The Open University, UK.

materials, b) timely, constructive feedback, and c) available continuous peer support. While more traditional pedagogy claims that learning takes place by top-down feeding of information from experts to novices, constructivists describe learning as the building of knowledge, with peers, in a social learning situation, thus creating joint meaning and understanding. Real learning occurs when the “novice” is able to explain to peers and other learners the newly acquired knowledge and understanding, thus becoming “expert” in his or her own right (Boudourides 1998; Glasersfeld 2001). Constructivist principles have been applied to language learning (Rüschhoff n.y.; Rüschhoff/Ritter 2001) and to online learning (Dougiamas 1998).

The DOTS team realized that raising teachers’ awareness and providing ICT training workshops would on their own not suffice to ensure confident and professional use of ICTs in language teaching as this neglects a crucial element: the teachers’ beliefs. Dadds (1997) has pointed out that many teaching reforms have failed because the teachers’ self-perception and the beliefs and values underlying their teaching were not considered. To engender truly sustainable change in teachers’ practice, a higher level of training needs to be addressed (see Kennedy 2005), for example, by engaging teachers in the co-construction of new practices.

The DOTS training approach is based on first establishing the needs of teachers through needs analysis questionnaires, and then creating training materials that will meet these needs. Parallel to this, we have developed tools to elicit representations of language teachers’ attitudes, values and beliefs with regard to the use of ICTs in language teaching, and categorized these representations into a framework of different teacher types. To make it easier for teachers to identify with these types and to find their own place in the framework, narrative representations have been chosen and presented in the form of “vignettes”, describing – initially – six different teacher types. Finally, all workshops are tailormade, as far as possible, in order to meet the expressed needs of participants and take into account the different types of ICT users amongst language professionals.

This paper will present our experience from the DOTS project and subsequent initiatives and discuss to what extent our research can contribute to a better understanding of the different needs and self-perceptions of teachers in online language teaching and enhance teacher training.

## *2. From DOTS to MoreDOTS and more...*

The DOTS project was established specifically to meet the needs of part-time teachers or those language professionals who are not regularly integrated into institutional staff development and training processes. Often, casually employed staff are expected to be as up-to-date in their skills as full-time staff despite missing out on regular professional development. In the fast-moving field of ICT for language teaching, this lack of training opportunities can be detrimental, as deficits appear quickly if regular up-skilling is not available. To counteract this, DOTS created a workspace for self-training. Short activities allow teachers to select specific online tools, find out if they are useful in their teaching context, read about examples of language learning tasks these tools can be used for, and develop the necessary skills to try out these tools for themselves. For feedback and queries, they can interact with peers in online forums.

Following the ECML's established model, the DOTS project started with an international workshop bringing together practitioners from 25 countries in Graz, Austria. A preparatory needs-analysis questionnaire and intensive consultations during the 2-day workshop helped to establish a ranked list of ten particularly useful ICT tools for language teaching. The eight experts collaborating in the DOTS project team then created training activities for these tools (<http://dots.ecml.at/TrainingKit/Activities/tabid/2805/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>), contributing their experience in diverse fields, such as online teaching and teacher training. The activities were tried out with 56 language teachers in DOTS workshops and then adapted following extensive feedback. Participants' feedback and contributions were added to the workspace and now form part of the jointly created knowledge base. Thus, workshop participants became experts in their own right and, at the same time, worked together to form a Community of Practice.

The DOTS workspace (<http://moodle.dots.ecml.at>) was launched at the "Closing conference of the 3rd programme of ECML activities" in 2011. Its core section contains self-training activities for currently ten different ICT tools<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Each activity follows the same format: Part A, a quick introduction to the functionalities and pedagogic value of the tool helps users to decide whether it would be worth their while to continue with the activity. Part B presents basic steps for self-training and sample activities. Part C invites users to reflect on the activity and helps them to evaluate whether they have enough information and confidence to try out the tool themselves, encouraging them to share their experience, their

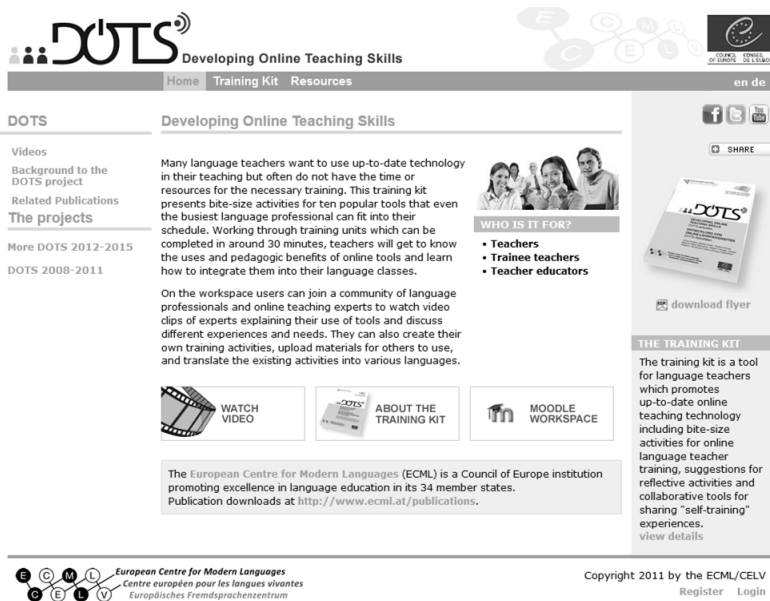


Figure 1: Screenshot of the DOTS project page (ECML)

Based on the first DOTS project, a number of new initiatives were developed. Firstly, between June 2012 and November 2013, a series of workshops in co-operation with the ECML Verein (<http://verein.ecml.at/>) was offered to Austrian language practitioners. Eleven workshops in total covered a geographical range of eight federal states, culminating in a nation-wide seminar in Graz. Over 200 participants – teachers in primary and secondary schools, teacher trainers and teacher trainees - took part in these workshops.

Secondly, a new initiative offered by the ECML allowed member states of the Council of Europe to apply for a national seminar involving consultancy support and a national DOTS workshop (<http://www.ecml.at/ECMLtrainingandconsultancyformemberstates/tabid/1055/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>). Four workshops were held with a total of over 150 participants.

Thirdly, a DOTS follow-up project called “MoreDOTS” (<http://dots.ecml.at/M5/tabid/2893/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>) was funded by the ECML

own ideas, and their queries with colleagues online. Each part of an activity should take no more than 30 minutes to complete.

from 2012 to 2013. The remit of this project was to extend the DOTS principles of self-training and the integration of ICT skills with pedagogical expertise to non-specialist language teachers<sup>3</sup>.

Finally, a new initiative was launched in 2013, linking the expertise of the ECML and Council of Europe in multilingualism and plurilingual education with the established project work of the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture: ICT-REV – the use of ICT in support of language teaching and learning (<http://ict-rev.ecml.at/en-us/>). Within this framework, national workshops run by team members are offered to key local disseminators in member countries with the aim of cascading the DOTS principles and activities as efficiently as possible.

Former workshop participants and experts in online language teaching might wish to create their own self-training activities based on the project templates. Details can be found at: <http://moodle.dots.ecml.at/>.

### *3. Methodology and findings*

In line with constructivist pedagogy, our method for creating the Moodle-based self-training platform for language teachers (DOTS) is not founded solely on the expertise of the project team but relies strongly on the exploration of users' experience and needs. Our qualitative approach to research helped us to establish an ever deepening understanding of the various needs teachers have: We started with data collection methods eliciting factual information (e.g. a needs analysis survey), moving on to questions on attitudes and self-perception. This material was collected via online questionnaires and served to create the original project materials. We requested information from teachers regarding the ICT tools they already use, the forms of training they have received, and the types of tools they would like to integrate into their teaching. Although this first survey was conducted on only a very small scale (26 respondents), the findings were useful, as the respondents came from a wide range of backgrounds: 25 different European countries were represented, including teachers from all educational settings, from primary school to higher education and teacher training. The pie chart below shows that almost a third of teachers had not received any formal training in the use of ICT, and nearly a fifth had

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<sup>3</sup> For example, a social worker supporting immigrant teenagers used the materials to create an activity integrating blogs for online collaboration between different youth groups.

learned from peers. This leaves only a small majority (14 respondents) who had been trained formally.

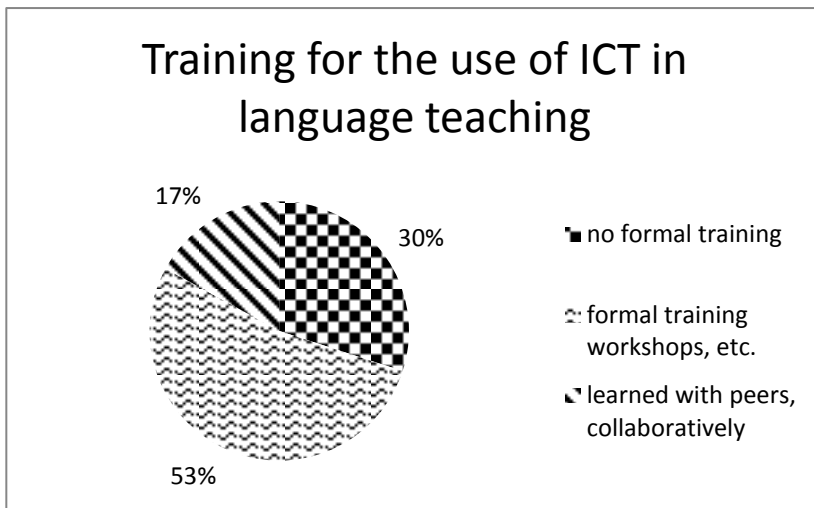


Figure 2: Training for the use of ICT (online survey)

From the needs analysis questionnaire, ten specific ICT tools emerged that the team concentrated on in the initial set-up of the workspace: blogs, wikis, online quizzes, SurveyMonkey, Audacity, YouTube, forums, podcasts, audio-conferencing and the Moodle platform<sup>4</sup>. During the DOTS workshops, there were opportunities to talk in more depth with the respondents, and confirm the selection of tools they would like to use in the future. In particular, Web 2.0 tools to foster learning via social interactions and collaboration (e.g. wikis and blogs), tools to create digital audio documents (e.g. Audacity®), and course management platforms to organize and distribute course material and help with classroom management (e.g. Moodle ) were highlighted.

As far as their perceived training needs were concerned, respondents stated that they would like to receive online teacher training to satisfy various objectives: i) to gain an overview of the online tools available for language teaching,

<sup>4</sup> The training activity for the Moodle platform provides an introduction to the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Moodle itself, enabling users to set up their own Moodle workspace for teaching.

ii) to provide a hands-on opportunity for exploring a specific tool, and iii) to share experience and best practice with other participants.

Following thorough discussions of these “baseline” findings, the team decided to collect qualitative data in a more systematic and action-research oriented way (Checkland/Holwell 1998) by integrating questions on teacher self-perception and training needs into the workshop activities. This approach ensures, first, that the tools available in the Moodle workspace will be continuously updated, so reflecting changes in technology or the use of online tools in language teaching. In addition, teachers and teacher trainers become more engaged with peers, because they have the opportunity not only to discuss pedagogic viewpoints and exchange examples of best practice during the workshops but they can also share experience and materials with a much larger audience in the workspace, thus becoming a part of a Community of Practice.

As the teacher training workshops are ongoing, we have added further details to our enquiry and to our findings, creating a cycle or spiral of investigation. Starting with the survey data and with short informal conversations during our workshops, we developed more refined data collection instruments. A short narrative frame (Barkhuizen/Wette 2008) asked teachers to complete sentences about their ICT use in general and in their language teaching. Next, we created an activity, asking workshop participants to write down their perceived strengths as teachers together with their most pressing needs regarding the successful integration of ICT in their teaching.

The responses to these activities were transcribed and analysed. We compared teachers of different levels of competence and confidence in using ICT, and through continuous comparison and ongoing discussion amongst the researchers, we identified six “types” of teachers.

Briefly, these types are:

- Type A likes computers, but only for private use;
- Type B loves teaching, but is not confident enough to use computers in class;
- Type C is sceptical about computers in language teaching;
- Type D is an expert in everything - ICT, language teaching, etc.;
- Type E sticks to what the rules and the syllabus say, does what he/she is told.
- Type F feels he/she does not have enough time, but would quite like to try out ICT tools in his/her teaching.



Establishing categories or types had been carried out carefully in an iterative process. The initially identified six teacher types were used for subsequent workshops, inviting participants either to select, and so confirm, one of these types or to suggest new teacher types. Therefore, in an ongoing process, new ideas and responses were collected, transcribed and integrated into our typology. To make the relevant training activity livelier and to allow participants to identify with a type of teacher, short “vignettes” were created, consisting of a fictitious name, a first-person statement that would be typical, a colour code, and a short description.

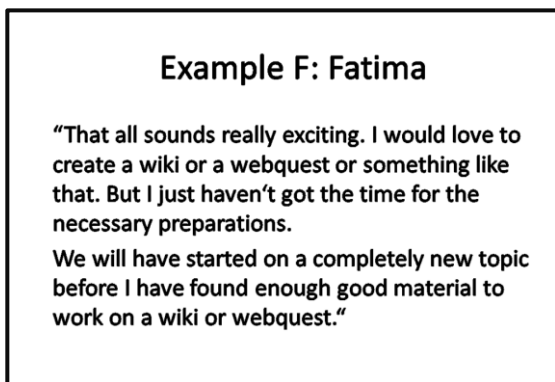


Figure 3: Example of first-person statement for teacher type vignette

These short vignettes of teacher types were presented to participants in the following workshops in one of the two official project languages, either German or English. Teachers were then asked to pick one of the types that represented most closely how they felt about ICT in language teaching, choose a colour coded card matching their preferred type, and write on one side their own strengths as a teacher and, on the other, their needs regarding the integration of ICT. In this manner the workshop participants were encouraged to reflect upon the use of ICT in their classroom in a structured way. By collecting more statements from participants in subsequent workshops, the teacher types were refined, and a new teacher type (G) was added. Type G is already using some ICTs but feels that he/she could use much more if he/she had an overview of what is available for language teaching.

Integrating workshop participants' own ideas into our materials enhanced the feeling of ownership amongst the teachers, helping them to make the most

of the training opportunity. For the same reason, a needs analysis questionnaire is sent to the participants via SurveyMonkey before each workshop. The responses illustrate the specific needs of those who attend the workshop, helping not only to raise participants' awareness prior to the training, but also allowing the workshop leaders to tailor the activities to participants' needs.

The continual collection of qualitative data and the extension of our categories helps us to build up a thick description (Geertz 1973) and comprehensive record of the self-perception of language teachers across Europe and of their training needs regarding the application of ICTs in language teaching.

### *5. Discussion and outlook*

In this paper, we have presented the constructing of a Moodle-based self-training workspace for language teachers that has been developed over the last seven years and its underlying concepts. The findings of our integrated action research indicate that to yield sustainable results teacher training needs to be based on the perceived, understood and acknowledged needs of language practitioners, and should integrate the teachers' self-perception and values in the joint construction of online activities.

Our workshops are shaped around the needs and contributions of participants, providing an open, non-threatening, and supported space to share good practice. For the future of our project(s), we envisage that the continued close cooperation between the team, workshop participants and visitors to the workspace will lead to a functioning Community of Practice which, in turn, will inform and inspire the development of activities and feedback on the Moodle workspace and ensure that the online tools and teaching materials will continue to meet the ever-changing and developing needs of language teachers.

In a different, less interactive format, the work of DOTS has been and will be presented to an academic audience at international conferences and in peer-reviewed publications. An edited volume on the complete findings of Developing Online Teaching Skills will be published in 2015 to continue our discussions with a wider public (Hampel/Stickler, in press). To maintain two-way communication and to be able to react and respond to feedback, interested practitioners are invited to join the DOTS Moodle workspace and contribute to its online Community of Practice. In this way, the DOTS workspace will act as a channel for the exchange of opinions, a shared space for reflective prac-

tice and could spark discussions about online language teacher training establishing a much needed theory-practice interface.

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